

Korah 5770 - The Universal and the Particular Challenges of Korah
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Shabbat Shalom.

“Rav lakhem! ki khol ha-eidah kulam kedoshim u’v’tokham Adonai u’madu’a titnas’u al-k’hal Adonai?”

[Moses and Aaron,] “you have gone too far! All of the community is holy and Adonai God is in THEIR midst. Why do YOU raise YOURselves up above Adonai’s congregation?”

It’s quite an opener. Probably not what Moshe and Aaron were expecting when they woke up that morning.

But suddenly they see Korah and his 250 followers and know that they have a problem on their hands, they need to call on their crisis management training – such as it was in those days.

But the leader, Korah, is Moses’s cousin – what do he and his fellow rebels want?

If they wanted to help with the leadership of the people, why didn’t Korah say instead: “Moshe, I really appreciate all you have done for our people and would like to get involved bringing God’s holiness to the people. Might you have any openings for me?” That approach might have led to a different outcome.

So what’s really bothering Korah? What’s fueling all this anger?

Our tradition sees two sides to Korah’s complaint. On the one hand, he’s right – everyone is holy – why do some get to be leaders? On the other hand, his words and actions mask his concern for his own ego. He wants center stage.

But the real thrust of his argument is that it is simply unfair; it is undemocratic that his cousins Moses and Aaron get special privileges and he and the other Levites do not (of course it should be noted that the Levites – and Korah is one of them – get their own special privileges compared to the rest of the people).

We might understand Korah as challenging this special status, this particularistic approach. He wants a more universal, inclusive structure. Some 3,500 years later this argument still resonates.

The ancient world was certainly more focused on hierarchy. The Torah sees the Children of Israel as distinct and holy among the nations. Within the Israelites, there are special groups – the *Levi’im*, the Levites and the *Kohanim*, the Priests. Korah and his supporters are protesting this distinctiveness – this elitism, if you will. Ego notwithstanding, Korah is making a beautiful democratic statement.

But why now? Why here at this moment of the Israelites journey through the wilderness? Let's look at the context for Korah's rebellion?

How does last week's Torah reading end?

Last week's *parashah* ends with the mitzvah of *tzitzit*, the commandment to tie tassels including a blue thread on the corners of our four-cornered clothing. Over thousands of years, this has evolved into the *tallitot* that are worn today. While some of us may consider the *tallit* a male garment or a mitzvah for men, there is nothing in the Torah's text that makes it gender specific. It is lovely to see so many women of all ages wearing tallitot here this morning including our Bat Mitzvah, Ruth.

It is a mitzvah that is given to the entire people – to the children of Israel as a whole. To better appreciate it, we need to know something about fashion in the ancient world. Then, only a few would have tassels, particularly with expensive blue dye, on their clothing. This was reserved for royalty, for the elite. So the Torah, as it is wont to do, is making a gentle revolution – taking the elite fashion of the time and democratizing it. These special tassels are not reserved solely for royalty, but given to the entire people.

We are left with a strongly democratic and holy message – we are all holy. We can all have these tassels and remember God's Presence in our lives and how the mitzvot can bring us closer to the *Kadosh Barukh Hu*, to the Holy One.

Right after that Korah, having heard the message, steps forward to proclaim that is not the way things are being run – some seem holier than others. He goes too far. While we can aspire to holiness, it is hubris to think we are already there and naïve to think we can all be the leader. That is where Korah gets tripped up.

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So how might this apply to us: today, we have a strongly democratic Judaism and Jewish world. Israel, our spiritual homeland is a democracy with leaders who are chosen through open electoral processes, whether or not we like the results.

But this can be extended beyond the Jewish world: to consider how we interact with the rest of the world. Today, our challenge and opportunity is to figure out how can we be both part of a particular community while remain connected to all humanity?

We are blessed that this Shabbat is also *Rosh Hodesh* (the beginning of the new month); if we look at the special haftarah for Shabbat *Rosh Hodesh* that Ruth chanted so beautifully, we find a balanced approach. We find Isaiah (or Second Isaiah, as scholars teach us) sharing a message of hope after the destruction of the First Temple some 2,500 years ago. He uses these two paradigms of *Rosh Hodesh* and Shabbat here at the end of his book.

What do we know about Rosh Hodesh? If we look up in the sky tonight and it's clear, then we can tell it is *Rosh Hodesh* – the moon is not visible in the sky. This is a natural phenomenon – if you can see the moon, you can tell what day of the month it is by how much of the moon is visible. Many ancient civilizations had celebrations on the New Moon, setting aside that one day a month. *Rosh Hodesh* is a reminder of importance of the universal.

But Isaiah also mentions Shabbat. Unlike the New Moon, Shabbat is not found in nature. Weeks are not a natural phenomenon; Shabbat is an innovation that goes beyond nature. Until the Torah introduces Shabbat and the concept of taking a day off – one every seven days – there is no week. Thus Shabbat is more particular. Though over time, it has been adopted from Judaism by both Christianity and Islam, during Isaiah's time – *Rosh Hodesh* was a universal holiday and Shabbat was particular to Israelites.

Isaiah closes his prophecy with “*Midei Hodesh B'Hodsho U'Midei Shabbat B'Shabato* – And new moon after new moon and Shabbat after Shabbat, all humanity will come together to worship the Eternal.”

By blending them both, Isaiah reminds us that we must live in the middle – that we need a certain amount of particularism, to belong to a family, a community, a people, but it must be tempered with universalism – the strong reminder that we are also connected to all on this Earth.

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Like our ancestors – literal or spiritual – living thousands of years ago, we are renewing an ancient tradition, aware that its insights from unplugging on Shabbat to affirming the dignity of all humanity and respecting the earth have just as much if not more relevance for us today, while we are extracting meaning for our modern world. Ideally and hopefully, we bring that vision to ourselves, to transform our own souls, being in touch with the Divine spark that lives with us, and then sharing that with our families, our friends, our community, the Jewish people and all humanity.

We walk in both the particular and universal. Today, may we all feel that hope that in a world filled with extremism, hateful speech and action, we can articulate a life in passionate moderation – a life imbued with our ancient traditions and wisdom, while deeply connected to this moment's concerns and realities. For those of us who are Jews, we can be deeply engaged as Jews, and still fill our lives with universal concerns. We can find the language to debate the issues of the day, moving ourselves and the world toward the healing and wholeness it so desperately needs.

We can live a life of holiness; we can then transform Korah's words from what they were to what they could be; instead of ‘I am as holy as you are, Moshe,’ it could be “Let us all strive to bring Moshe's holiness and Torah into our lives and the world.”

Shabbat Shalom.